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BARD CONSERVATORY ORCHESTRA

LEON BOTSTEIN, MUSIC DIRECTOR

FISHER
CENTER

SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 2025 AT 7 PM
SOSNOFF THEATER

Bard

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Bard College Conservatory of Music

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Presents

BARD CONSERVATORY ORCHESTRA

Leon Botstein, Music Director

**Johannes Brahms
(1833–97)**

Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56A

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756–91)**

Piano Concerto No. 24 in C Minor, K. 491

Tianxiang (Tessa) Ni, piano

I. Allegro

II. Larghetto

III. Allegretto

Cadenza by Tianxiang (Tessa) Ni

Intermission

**George Perle
(1915–2009)**

Six Bagatelles

**César Franck
(1822–90)**

Symphony in D Minor

I. Lento; Allegro non troppo

II. Allegretto

III. Allegro non troppo

Sosnoff Theater

Fisher Center for the Performing Arts

Bard College

Saturday, March 15, 2025 at 7 pm

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56A (1873)

Johannes Brahms

Born in Hamburg, Germany, 1833

Died in Vienna, Austria, 1897

Contrary to what Johannes Brahms believed, the theme on which these variations are based is not by Joseph Haydn. Brahms found the theme in a wind serenade that was published under Haydn's name but, as it turns out, was written by Haydn's pupil Ignaz Joseph Pleyel (1757–1831). In any case, the theme itself is neither by Haydn nor by Pleyel: it is a traditional melody that used to be sung in Austrian village processions on the feast of St. Anthony of Padua (June 13).

The most remarkable feature of this theme is that it consists of two phrases that are five measures each—not four measures, as is usual in classical music. This peculiarity must have intrigued Brahms, who carefully maintained it throughout the eight variations while exploring a wide variety of tempos, characters, orchestral colors, and compositional techniques.

When stating the theme, Brahms stayed close to the original wind scoring of Pleyel's serenade. The theme has a definite archaic flavor to it, but, as soon as the first variation starts, we are transported into unmistakably Brahmsian territory. Brahms was fond of combining duple and triple divisions of the beat either simultaneously or in close succession, and he loved to build melodies out of successive intervals of thirds. We find both of these fingerprints already in the first variation, where the eighth notes of the violin melody are rising in thirds while the descending triplets of the violas and cellos outline the same intervals. The parts are later reversed, but the construction in thirds and the duple-triple contrast dominate the entire variation.

The first variation is already faster than the theme; the second variation, where the major mode switches to minor, moves even more rapidly. There is a notable dynamic contrast between the *forte* passages played by the whole orchestra and the *piano* passages given to the strings and selected woodwinds.

The third variation is really two variations in one, for—instead of repeating each half of the theme literally as he did before—Brahms now changes the orchestration at the repeat. The main difference between the two subvariations is that the second one includes delicate ornamental passages played by the flutes and bassoons.

The fourth variation—again in the minor mode, and in a slower tempo—is a masterpiece of counterpoint, in which Brahms shows his prodigious knowledge of Baroque musical techniques. The form of polyphonic treatment we find here is known as “inverted counterpoint at the twelfth.” “Counterpoint” is when two completely independent melodies are played simultaneously; “inverted counterpoint” is when the counterpoint works regardless of which voice is on top; and “at the twelfth” means that when the counterpoint is actually inverted, one of the two lines is also transposed by a twelfth—that is, an octave and a fifth. The beauty of it all is that the learned effort never shows: one hears a simple, haunting melody on the winds accompanied by a faster figure in the strings before the roles are reversed. Yet the variation wouldn't have the special atmosphere it possesses if its dreamlike lyricism were not supported by a rigorous underlying structure.

The fifth variation is the Scherzo of the set. Quick staccato (short and separated) notes in both winds and strings, mostly pianissimo with occasional off-beat accents, give this section a light, fleeting character.

The first five variations actually retain little from the original theme besides its five-bar phrases and, more or less, its bass line. This is why it comes as something of a surprise when, in Variation 6: *Vivace*, the “St. Anthony” melody returns in the horns—almost in its original form, though with a faster tempo.

The seventh variation is again slower (“*grazioso*”). Its expressive melody is played by solo flute and violas, with violins and bassoons taking over the second time. The other instruments add a delicate and sensitive accompaniment, with some exquisite dissonances that lend a special flavor to this quiet, pastoral passage.

Variation 8: *Presto non troppo*, which again visits the minor mode, is fast and mysterious, and has a special sound quality owing to the muted strings. A contrapuntal finale immediately follows—a *passacaglia* over the bass line of the theme's first five measures. In the *passacaglia*, the bass repeats those five measures while the rest of the orchestra plays ever-changing countermelodies to that stable “ground” whose melody is later taken over by higher-pitched instruments. The work closes with the original form of the St. Anthony Chorale, played by the entire orchestra in a triumphant fortissimo.

Brahms returned to the idea of ending an orchestral work with a *passacaglia* when he wrote his Fourth Symphony in 1884–85. In retrospect, the ending of the Haydn Variations could be seen as a preliminary study for the later work.

Piano Concerto No. 24 in C Minor, K. 491 (1786)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born in Salzburg, Austria, 1756

Died in Vienna, Austria, 1791

The original manuscript of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's C-Minor Concerto, preserved at the Royal College of Music in London, is a highly unusual document. Mozart is often said to have composed with extreme facility, completing many of his pieces in his head before writing down the first note. This case is different: the numerous erasures and other changes suggest that the work gave Mozart quite a bit of trouble. Certain measures went through as many as four different versions on paper.

Despite these signs of struggle, Mozart must have worked at his usual speed, if not faster. The manuscript bears evidence of being written in great hurry, for some of the virtuoso passages are notated only in a kind of shorthand. We know that the concerto was completed by March 24, 1786, but we are not sure when Mozart started working on it. However, since he finished his previous concerto (A Major, K. 488) only on March 2, he cannot have spent more than three weeks on the new work—and probably much less than that as, during this time, his energies were largely devoted to *The Marriage of Figaro* (K. 492), an opera completed on April 29.

If the concerto's genesis was not exactly smooth sailing, the work itself is definitely one of the most dramatic in Mozart's entire output. The key of C minor often spells tragedy in Mozart, but it is not the key per se that carries dark connotations. Rather, there is a special musical vocabulary that goes along with the key, including devices such as chromaticism; a frequent use of unison; and the dissonant interval of the diminished seventh. Each of these devices undermines the harmonic stability of the music in its own way. Chromaticism, or motion in half-steps, introduces notes foreign to the principal tonality. Unison dispenses with harmony altogether, creating a texture reduced in the extreme and fraught with special tension. Finally, the diminished seventh, with its characteristic "bite," is the main ingredient in the most dissonant chord of the classical harmonic system. All three devices are present in the first 12 measures of the concerto.

The continuation of the movement is just as exciting as its beginning. High-tension moments alternate with sections that bring relief. The development is particularly long and involves harmonic intricacies not often found in Mozart. In the recapitulation, even the lyrical moments sound more dramatic than before. This is because, in accordance with the rules of sonata form, the melodies previously played in a brighter E-flat major now appear in the somber home key.

In the slow movement, Mozart invests a very simple melody with an unmatched depth of feeling. Formally, it is a rondo with a main theme and two episodes—one of which returns to the C minor of the opening. The principal woodwind players emerge as veritable co-soloists, with parts every bit as attractive and virtuosic as the piano's. The movement ends with a coda derived from the second episode, but Mozart adds two horns whose simple contributions produce an effect that is nothing short of magical.

The finale, a theme and variations, returns to the tragic C minor tonality, which often features the aforementioned chromaticism and diminished sevenths. There is no chromaticism this time, but Mozart brings in another of his favorite dramatic devices: the "Neapolitan" sixth, based on the lowered second-degree of the scale—that is, D-flat in the key of C minor. All of these "tragic" touches are superimposed on a lighthearted dance rhythm, and there are more exquisite woodwind solos along the way.

Two of the variations of this finale are in major keys, temporarily brightening the mood. But, for the ending, Mozart reverts to C minor, which is unusual because most of his minor-mode works include a final modulation to the major. Not here—the chromaticism even intensifies before the end, which almost sounds like a cry of despair.

This concerto was a particular favorite of Ludwig van Beethoven's. Pianist-composer Johann Baptist Cramer witnessed Beethoven's enthusiastic response to the piece when they listened to it together in Vienna's Augarten park in 1799. Mozart's work clearly served as a model for Beethoven's own Piano Concerto in C Minor, written just a few years after this memorable experience.

The cadenza in this performance is written by Tianxiang (Tessa) Ni.

Six Bagatelles (1965)

George Perle

Born in Bayonne, New Jersey, 1915

Died in New York, New York, 2009

George Perle's reputation rests largely on his work as a scholar and teacher: he was a leading music theorist, an expert on the music of Alban Berg, and a longtime professor at Queens College. Yet he was also a prolific composer who not only wrote a book about "twelve-tone tonality" but also practiced it in a voluminous catalogue of compositions.

The title of the present work recalls Anton Webern's Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, Op. 9 (1913), an iconic—though not twelve-tone—work in the Viennese master's most aphoristic style. Perle's Six Bagatelles takes approximately six minutes to perform; Nos. 4 and 5 run for two minutes each, leaving about thirty seconds for each of the other movements.

Where Webern's brief pieces (even those for orchestra) are often soft and tender in tone, Perle's Bagatelles possess a great deal of rhythmic energy. The American composer uses a large orchestra with triple woodwind and a full brass section that makes its presence known right at the outset. The six movements strongly contrast in character, but there is also plenty of contrast within each movement. The fifth movement, in particular, stands out from the others: it is scored for strings alone, and its delicate, largely unchanging harmonies suggest complete immobility, as if responding to the "Farben" (Colors) movement from Arnold Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16 (1909). It is a meditative moment, but the extremely brief final movement seems to laugh it off—ending the work abruptly with a few powerful chords.

Symphony in D Minor (1888)

César Franck

Born in Liège, Netherlands (now Belgium), 1822

Died in Paris, France, 1890

César Franck composed this work—his only symphony aside from an early student work—at the age of 66, two years before his death. He clearly wished to make a major statement and establish his status as a leading French composer, a status that was far from uncontested. In his own time, Franck was famous as an organist and teacher; as a composer, however, he had been only moderately successful, though his catalogue of works was vast and varied. Many considered him an outsider because he was not born in France; others did not take him seriously because he had written no operas.

Opera composers, such as Charles Gounod, Ambroise Thomas, or Jules Massenet, were in fact the most powerful players on the French music scene. Symphonic and chamber music did not enjoy the same prestige, and two composers, Franck and Camille Saint-Saëns, were trying to change that.

Saint-Saëns and Franck were very different personalities, though both were virtuoso organists, spending decades at the consoles of Parisian churches: Saint-Saëns at La Madeleine, Franck at Sainte-Clotilde. Both were inspired and supported by Franz Liszt, who was interested in everything younger composers were doing. But Saint-Saëns was also a brilliant pianist, a gifted writer, a world traveler, and an incredibly prolific and versatile composer who wrote no fewer than 13 operas. Franck, his senior by 13 years, was not as vivacious, wrote less, worked more slowly and in fewer genres, and hardly ever left Paris. For many years, the two were locked in a bitter rivalry, exacerbated by their often very vocal followers and acolytes.

In 1886, Saint-Saëns completed his Symphony No. 3 in C Minor (the so-called "Organ Symphony"), which was performed with great success in Paris the following year. One of the most distinctive features of this work was the use of different variants of the same basic motif throughout the symphony. This was a technique adopted from Liszt's symphonic poems, though its roots can be traced back to Franz Schubert's "Wanderer" Fantasy. Franck decided to use the same technique, in part as a response to his rival. His Symphony in D Minor, composed in 1887–88, received its premiere at the Paris Conservatory in February 1889, the same place where Saint-Saëns's symphony had been given just two years earlier.

Franck's symphony is in three movements instead of the usual four: the middle movement combines elements of the traditional slow movement and scherzo. Unlike Saint-Saëns, who based his symphony on the transformations of a single melody, Franck used several recurrent motifs, making for a more complex and less predictable scheme. The first of these motifs, which opens the work, consists of three notes and alludes to two earlier compositions: Liszt's symphonic poem "Les Préludes," and Ludwig van Beethoven's last string quartet (Op. 135)—in which we hear almost the same music, with the words *Muss es sein?* ("Must it be?") written by Beethoven under the notes. Franck used this motif to fashion the slow introduction of his symphony, then transformed it into the tempestuous main theme of the first movement's fast section. He brought back the slow tempo and, with it, the original "brooding" form of the theme on two occasions during the movement. Yet, there is also time for a completely different melodic idea—a triumphant, hymn-like tune that also transforms over the course of the piece.

The second movement opens with some quiet harmonies for pizzicato (plucked) strings and harp that become the accompaniment for a beautiful melody featuring the English horn. (Franck was rather rudely taken to task by one critic for giving a solo to this instrument—a lower-pitched cousin of the oboe—which was not then a completely established member of the orchestra.) Several variations on this theme follow, some of which are scherzo-like, alluding to the playful movement type most 19th-century symphonies include.

The third movement (in D major) is happy and jubilant in tone; its exuberant first theme derives from the second theme of the opening movement. Later, some darker memories from the first two movements are evoked. Shortly before the end, the lyrical theme from the second movement returns as a weighty, dramatic statement with full brass and kettledrums. Immediately afterward, the "brooding" theme of the first movement appears as if in a dream, only to be shrugged off by a confident affirmation of the jubilant main melody that brings the symphony to its conclusion.

Peter Laki, *Visiting Associate Professor of Music Emeritus*
March 2025

BIOGRAPHIES

In addition to serving as music director of the Bard Conservatory Orchestra, **Leon Botstein** is music director and principal conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra (ASO), founder and music director of The Orchestra Now (TÖN), coartistic director of Bard SummerScape and the Bard Music Festival, and principal guest conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra (JSO), where he served as music director from 2003 to 2011. He has been guest conductor with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Aspen Music Festival, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Mariinsky Theatre, Russian National Orchestra in Moscow, Bamberg Symphony, Taipei Symphony, and Sinfónica Juvenil de Caracas in Venezuela, among others. Recordings include a Grammy-nominated recording of Gavriil Popov's First Symphony with the London Symphony Orchestra, acclaimed recordings of Paul Hindemith's *The Long Christmas Dinner* with the ASO, and Othmar Schoeck's *Lebendig begraben* with TÖN, as well as recordings with the NDR Orchestra Hamburg and the BBC Orchestra. Additional recordings with TÖN feature *Ries: Piano Concertos Nos. 8 & 9* and *Rubbra & Bliss: Piano Concertos* on Hyperion Records; *Piano Protagonists: Music for Piano and Orchestra* and *Classics of American Romanticism* on Bridge Records; and *The Lost Generation: Apostel • Kauder • Busch* and *Exodus: Kaufmann • Rubin • Tal* on AVIE Records. He is editor of *The Musical Quarterly* and of *The Compleat Brahms* (Norton). At the invitation of the City of Nuremberg, TÖN will travel to Germany for a commemorative concert in Nuremberg on May 8, 2025, to mark the 80th anniversary of the Allied victories in Europe in 1945 with an all-Mendelssohn program.

Featured soloist **Tianxiang (Tessa) Ni**, a pianist from Beijing, China, is a second-year student at the Bard Conservatory, studying under Rieko Aizawa. She was the winner of the 2023 Conservatory Concerto Competition. Ni has performed extensively throughout China and has received numerous accolades, including first prize at the BIMFA Competition, first prize in the Young Artists category of the Chicago International Music Competition, and a scholarship from the Latin GRAMMY Cultural Foundation.

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 Hannah Balcomb, *Academic Coordinator, MA in Chinese Music and Culture, US-China Music Institute*
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Adele Anthony
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Yi-Wen Jiang
Erica Kiesewetter
Honggang Li**
Weigang Li**
Daniel Phillips
Gil Shaham
Mira Wang
Carmit Zori

Viola

Luosha Fang '11
Marka Gustavsson
Brian Hong
Honggang Li**
Melissa Reardon

Cello

Raman Ramakrishnan
Peter Wiley

Bass

Satoshi Okamoto

Flute

Tara Helen O'Connor

Clarinet

David Krakauer
Pascual Martínez-Forteza
Anthony McGill**

Oboe

Elaine Douvas
Keisuke Ikuma
Alexandra Knoll
Ryan Roberts

Bassoon

Marc Goldberg

Trumpet

Edward Carroll

Horn

Barbara Jöstlein-Currie
Hugo Valverde

Trombone

Demian Austin
Sasha Romero
Nicholas Schwartz
Weston Sprott

Tuba

Derek Fenstermacher
Alec Mawrence
Marcus Rojas

Harp

Mariko Anraku

Percussion

Eric Cha-Beach
Jason Haaheim
Jason Treuting

Piano

Reiko Aizawa
Benjamin Hochman**
Blair McMillen
Terrence Wilson

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Mark Baechle, *Film*
Da Capo Chamber Players
Missy Mazzoli
Jessie Montgomery
James Sizemore, *Film*
Joan Tower
George Tsontakis

Undergraduate Voice

Lucy Fitz Gibbon '15
Claire Galloway
Rufus Müller
Teresa Buchholz
Erika Switzer
David Sytkowski

Chamber Music

Marka Gustavsson, *Coordinator*
Frank Corliss
Raymond Erickson
Keisuke Ikuma
Nicholas Alton Lewis
Raman Ramakrishnan
Melissa Reardon

Music Theory and History

Christopher H. Gibbs
David Sytkowski
Ryan McCullough

Orchestral Studies

Leon Botstein
Erica Kiesewetter

Alexander Technique

Alex Farkas

US-China Music Institute

Jindong Cai, *Director*
Shutong Li, *Chinese Ensemble*
Xinyan Li, *Chinese Music History*
Qiao Jia, *Chinese Percussion*
Chen Yan, *Erhu*
Xu Yang, *Ruan*
Mingmei Yip, *Chinese Music
History*
Yu Hongmei, *Erhu*
Zhang Hongyan, *Pipa*
Zhao Jiazhen, *Guqin*
Cui Junzhi, *Konghou*
Yazhi Guo, *Suona*

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Leon Botstein, *Codirector*
Kyle Gann
Christopher H. Gibbs
Zachary Schwartzman
Joan Tower

Graduate Vocal Arts

Stephanie Blythe, *Artistic Director*
Kayo Iwama, *Associate Director*
Edith Bers
Richard Cox
Elaine Fitz Gibbon
Lucy Fitz Gibbon '15
Lorraine Nubar
Joan Patenaude-Yarnell
Elizabeth Reese
Erika Switzer
Howard Watkins

Baroque Ensemble

Renée Anne Louprette GCP '19

Collaborative Piano Fellowship

Erika Switzer, *Director*

**Master classes

BARD COLLEGE

Founded in 1860, Bard College is a four-year residential college of the liberal arts and sciences located 90 miles north of New York City. With the addition of the Montgomery Place and Massena properties, Bard's campus consists of more than 1,200 parklike acres in the Hudson River Valley. It offers bachelor of arts, bachelor of science, and bachelor of music degrees, with majors in nearly 40 academic programs; advanced degrees through 13 graduate programs; 10 early colleges; and numerous dual-degree programs nationally and internationally. Building on its 165-year history as a competitive and innovative undergraduate institution, Bard College has expanded its mission as a private institution acting in the public interest across the country and around the world to meet broader student needs and increase access to liberal arts education. The undergraduate program at the main campus in upstate New York has a reputation for scholarly excellence, a focus on the arts, and civic engagement. Bard is committed to enriching culture, public life, and democratic discourse by training tomorrow's thought leaders. For more information about Bard College, visit bard.edu.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT FOR BARD COLLEGE IN ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON Developed in Cooperation with the Stockbridge-Munsee Community

In the spirit of truth and equity, it is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are gathered on the sacred homelands of the Munsee and Muhheaconneok people, who are the original stewards of this land. Today, due to forced removal, the community resides in Northeast Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We honor and pay respect to their ancestors, past and present, as well as to future generations, and we recognize their continuing presence in their homelands. We understand that our acknowledgment requires those of us who are settlers to recognize our own place in and responsibilities towards addressing inequity and that this ongoing and challenging work requires that we commit to real engagement with the Munsee and Mohican communities to build an inclusive and equitable space for all. For more information about the Stockbridge-Munsee Community, please visit mohican.com.

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NOON CONCERT SERIES

MONDAY, APRIL 14 AT NOON

Conservatory Performance Space

HEAVEN IN A WILD FLOWER: THE EARTHLY AND THE DIVINE

Graduate Conducting Program Degree Recital
with The Orchestra Now

SUNDAY, APRIL 27 AT 2 PM

Sosnoff Theater

Fisher Center

NOON CONCERT SERIES

MONDAY, APRIL 18 AT NOON

Conservatory Performance Space

BARD CONSERVATORY ORCHESTRA

Conducted by Tan Dun

SATURDAY, MAY 10 AT 7 PM

Sosnoff Theater

Fisher Center

More information: bard.edu/conservatory/events

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